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Anti-Elites as New Elites: Complexities of Elite Performance in Baffled Bolivia

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Abstract

This article argues that recent political changes in Bolivia, leading to the first indigenous president in the country's history being inaugurated in 2006, unsettled the traditional schemes of societal stratification, as well as the traditionally accepted markers of elite-hood. As a consequence, not only have new elites come to the fore, but they also modified the material, symbolic and political parameters with which elites demonstrate and affirm their position, leading to new searches for self-positioning as elites. Some sectors of the old elites developed an egoistic, revengeful subjectivity bringing bloodshed to the country. The new elite, on the contrary, is fragmented, confused and in part reluctant to perform as elite.

Keywords

Bolivia, elites, anti-elite elites, political change, indigenous

In the new Bolivia represented by indigenous president Evo Morales, presidential symbolism underwent a radical plot twist. On at least half of the photos published by newspapers and press agencies of the incumbent president, "Evo" (as he is usually referred to by friend and foe) appears covered with confetti and adorned with a floral wreath. The pictures are seldom

taken in his presidential palace or in or around parliament. They are taken at all the places where the president speaks – villages, trade-union-meetings, social and political manifestations –, and where his messages to Bolivia and the world are voiced. Evo Morales is a tireless traveller across his country. In indigenous circles, to receive a high authority with flowers and confetti is common.

Never has the president been caught with a tie and jacket. As a matter of fact, the – possibly apocryphal – story goes that, after his pre-inauguration-tour through Europe in early 2006, Morales was criticized for continuously wearing a woollen jersey on all his encounters with European government leaders, presidents and even the Spanish king. Wearing such a woollen sweater, often alpaca,¹ is very common among Bolivia's indigenous majority population: the highlands, their original habitat, are cold. Nevertheless, it was seen by many as too big a divergence from the dress code at international meetings. In spite of this, as the story goes, Evo Morales still refused the tie and jacket. It was in his view too reminiscent of the standard outfit of the type of politicians he had fiercely opposed in the years before he was elected president (December 2005), those politicians Evo had denounced as “neoliberals,” *mank'agastos*,² and corrupt. Now, he asserted, not only a new power-holder but also a new ethnic presence and pride had to be presented. Still, most agreed, the jersey was a bit too inconspicuous. Therefore the most famous fashion designer of Bolivia, Beatriz Canedo Patiño, was asked to design something new. She came up with a sort of informal, blazer-like jacket, in different versions with various colours, adorned with strips or flounces of *ahuayo*-weavings³ inserted in the fabric. Such weavings are a traditional indigenous craft. Since then, Evo usually wears this “indigenous yet proper” apparel – and he hitherto has not been caught with a tie. But he *did* of course inherit the presidential plane, residence and luxury cars...

Evo and his political entourage believe they should relate to, and interact with, their constituency and “the people” in general, in a new mode. They constitute, in a way, an anti-elite-elite; not only because of the

¹) The *alpaca* is an animal resembling a *llama*, famous for the high quality of its woollen fiber.

²) *Mank'agastos* are “parasites,” those who become rich by exploiting, not by working.

³) *Ahuayo*-weavings are traditional aymara weavings, of finely spun camelid and sheep wool.

political rejection of what the old elite stood for, but also because of a different vision of what the relation between governors and governed should be. This new relation, still being construed every day, guides the new governor's self-presentations, impact-strategies and interactions – and the new elite often prefer to do so far away from the symbolically burdened buildings of power and stateliness in La Paz.

The difference with his predecessors is of course considerable. They used to be dressed top-notch, complying with all the “white powerholder world's” conventions. They used to glimmer in or around the governmental and parliamentary infrastructures. The politicians and the wealthy were infamous for their arrogance, and often extravagance and fondness of anything foreign.⁴ The wealthy, of course, are still present; only their political representatives have lost their positions. The rich, however, are fully aware of the crucial importance of a new political articulation – but this time with a new cloak and style. Remarkably, for instance, the current opposition in Bolivia often forsakes the formal wear as well. In their case, the motivation seems to be a wish to convey an image of hard-working, protocol-weary entrepreneurs, slaving away to contribute to Bolivia's “modernization.” They believe that their best strategy is not to counter Morales's policies and support with decorum, but to present an image of tough workers whose efforts are paying off. They thus attempt to attract the rank and file with ambitions to improve their lot.

It should be added, that the opposition today is a *localized* one: having lost out dramatically during the 2005 elections, and again during the 2008 referendum, the economical and political elites of Bolivia opted for a geographic strategy to re-articulate. Concentrated in the relatively wealthy, natural resources-blessed department of Santa Cruz⁵ and other departments in the east of the country, they made regional autonomy the

⁴ They would hardly expect the middle and lower classes, and even less the indigenous, to emulate them. Being “genuine” *dependent elites*, they imitated those whom they admired. In Bolivia, emulation thus appears different from a simple of “trickling down” scheme (see Daloz 2007: 35–36).

⁵ Santa Cruz has enormous gas reserves. It is the largest of all the nine departments in Bolivia, and it is a (sub)tropical area with huge extensions of forest, grazing land, and arable land. Larger scale agriculture prevails. Santa Cruz also has the most unequal distribution of land in the country. According to Balderrama (2002), 73% of the land is in the hands of middle and big proprietors, representing 23% of total landowners, whereas 77% of the Santa Cruz rural population (individual peasants and indigenous communities) own 27% of the land.

catalyst of their counter-strategy. Invoking regionalist sentiments, invoking rumours about their department financing the poorer other regions, and accusing the government of centralistic meddlesomeness, they managed to win a departmental referendum on regional autonomy in May 2008 and inspired several other departments to follow suit. The Santa Cruz department being a subtropical region of Bolivia, the spokespersons of this opposition often appear during their speeches and on television interviews short-sleeved and without the tie – as if they had only briefly interrupted their hard work of managing a large enterprise. In their discourses they emphasize hard work, employment, exports and the departmental ambition to grow and prosper. Conspicuously, to underscore the regional identity, they will occasionally dress up in attire of the departmental, lowland indigenous peoples, suggesting a type of ethnic roots and authenticity. On the other hand, less leeway is given to the highland indigenous immigrants. Miss Bolivia 2005, coming from the region, declared that “in Santa Cruz we are white, tall, and we speak English.”

We will first sketch in a succinct way the traditional social divisions and concomitant behavioural codes in Latin America and Bolivia – divisions and codes that have been seriously challenged and diluted in recent years. This sketch will help us to address the issues of this “double” new elite constitution, and to understand the reasons why symbols, discourses and paraphernalia of both competing elites turn out to be so galvanizing for the one and infuriating for the other party. In the subsequent part, we will briefly outline the landscape of the contemporary political conflict in Bolivia. Next, we will go to the Santa Cruz region and focus on the new profile the traditional political and economic elites are assuming, combining new symbols with old schemes of “standing out” and of justifying their wealth and natural superiority. In the fourth part, we will visit the Bolivian highlands and delve into the ways the new political elite – with an unmistakable albeit controversial *ethnic* identity – assumes its novel eminence and is embedded in the ranks of its supporters; both the many poor, but also the conspicuously rich among them. Finally, we will attempt to draw some preliminary conclusions.

Traditional Elitism in Latin America

In most Latin American countries, traditionally, a marked gap between the different social groups existed. The continent is characterized by

“imbalanced interest group systems in which the elites are well organized and represented” (Wiarda 2001: 337; see also Lievesley 1999). The result was, and still is, dramatic socio-economic inequality. And “(h)igh inequalities bias the political rules of the game and mold politics in favour of the wealthy and the privileged, and they do so (to different degrees) whether regimes are authoritarian or democratic” (Karl 2003: 136). Due to the absence of solid institutional backing the equality of citizens, most countries on the continent were marked by the virtual non-existence of the societal codes of individual sovereignty, equality before the law, respect in treatment irrespective of family-name, appearance and prestige, effective access to public positions, individual liberties, and the like. It gave elites a privileged position going beyond the common advantages of higher spending patterns, and distinguished access to resources such as first class education and healthcare; it also conferred them a kind of “right” to bypass the law. Elites would often illegally enrich themselves through plug money and the evasion of taxes, their sons would not pay their traffic fines, they would keep their kids out of military service, and they would not queue to get their bureaucratic chores done. “The reality is that, with few exceptions, rule is still based more on power than on law. Judicial systems are less about justice than providing protection for those who can pay for it and punishing those who can not” (Payne 1998, cited in Wiarda 2001: 339). The elite would, moreover, often look down upon their inferiors, look upon them with disregard, and underpay and abuse their nannies and gardeners. Most often, the subaltern would accept – albeit reluctantly – such treatment. Traditionally the symbolic power of the elites was compelling enough to make “people recognize the legitimacy of those who utter them” (Gledhill 2000: 144, see also Higley and Gunther 1995). People *learn* their “rights” in the course of their lifetime interactions with the state institutions and the “significant other classes.” “The actual (...) consciousness of members of a class is the product of practical historical experiences of living-in-the-world” (Gledhill 2000: 140). What people, in such a situation, require from the system is not the full execution of the rule of law, but a somewhat better implementation of some of the concrete relationships involved. What they aim for is a little less deceit, lying and rudeness in the inter-personal exchanges with functionaries and “high individuals,” and also to receive a somewhat better treatment and outcome. Most often, the relations with the elite would be *personal*, and not based on legal or

procedural prescriptions and/or entitlements (Damatta 1985; see also Avritzer 2002: 73). One would not ask for one's *right*, but for clemency or munificence. One would also try to call in "higher-up" connections to get things done: get a permit, get a kid enrolled in a school, get a job, and the like. Elites would however remain capricious, unpredictable and untouchable (Lehmann 1990). It made life difficult for non-elites; things were uncertain since it was not the formal rule or their own endeavours, but more often than not some elite's fancy, which would decide on their lot. "[I]ndividuals get used to the idea that they are surrounded by a hostile and unfair world in which, however great the personal effort, positive results are never guaranteed" (Larain 2000: 200).

The pattern, moreover, was frequently aggravated by a racial stratification, sometimes coined a "pigmentocracy" (Larkin 2007). In many countries, darker skins would coincide with lower status – Anibal Quijano (2002) called this "a racial division of labour" – whereas elites would (thanks to their whiteness as well as their lifestyle) try to resemble as much as possible the European or North American models. Traditionally in Latin America, being elite was a privilege indeed. Societal interaction being slanted, the polity being their exclusive domain, the judicial system being unaccountable to public control and hardly "affordable", and authoritarianism being daily routine, not much effort had to be given to legitimisation. But things have changed.

In Bolivia, in January 2005, the traditional "anti-elite" conquered political power. Those who always mocked and criticized traditional elites and their box of tricks to appear as "leaders", took over.

Bolivia's Current Political Battlefield

Bolivia, the poorest country in South America, regained democracy after suffering a long period of military dictatorship until 1982. But democracy did not deliver. Elitism, corruption, political exclusion and a mounting discontent with neoliberal policies resulted in mass protests, especially after 2000. Trust in the traditional political elites withered, as they came to be seen as working only for the wealthy, and the *blanco-mestizos* (Tapia 2008: 16).

The process slowly but surely eroded the stature and taken-for-grantedness of the elite's privileged access to governing circles. They increasingly failed to perform as groups that, being members of the upper social

echelons, still *connected* to “the populace”, heard their concerns, and were dignified examples and leaders. The political parties’ campaigning discourses hardly ever revealed analyses of Bolivia’s situation or visions for its future, and made no attempt to distinguish themselves from other political competitors through a focus on content. Party differences had nothing to do with alternative positions on policy, nor with efforts to articulate the interests of different societal sectors. Increasingly, the minority sectors of the population to which the various parties still *did* appeal were by and large the better-off sectors. This appeal was not one based on affinity with political analysis or policy statements, but one based on inherited family ties, clientelism, or prebendalism (Mayorga 2001). In Bolivia, the connection between people’s perceptions of political directions and actions on the one hand, and their access to the actors and entities embodying these directions and actions, on the other hand, broke down. As a consequence, a rift between the political dimension in society, on the one hand, and the polity, occupied by elites, on the other, emerged. This rift could only be mended by “unmediated” collisions between the two, as Bolivia witnessed since 2000. As from that year, an innumerable series of massive and sometimes violent protests struck the country. The protests, in a more or less direct way, undermined the status of the elites. Their attributes and attitudes were increasingly seen as synonymous with deceitfulness. The political elite, although clamping to its traditional symbolism and conceitedness as self-evident ruling clan, had lost its prestige.

The old elite of course maintained its status of wealth, and of being envied for its access to power-holding positions, its eloquence, and the like. But the esteem of the population for these elites, allegedly the only ones fit and capable for delivering the political foremen and cadres, crumbled between the 1990s and 2005. In December 2005, the tide turned: an indigenous presidential candidate who had managed to amalgamate the frustration and anger, won absolute majority in the first electoral round. All over sudden, the “ruled” now took over the state apparatus. Among many other things, it triggered a fierce political battle: the old elites used all the tricks in the book to prevent the new administration from pursuing its programme. Bolivia’s current political situation is this: a sometimes grimy struggle over politics, but even more so over statuses, ethnic belonging and ranking, and over the country’s inherited socio-cultural stratification.

The Denial of Worthy-ness of the Subaltern: The Weapon of Autonomy

The elites, and their interests and imposition of political style, now were minority in the national arena. They regrouped *regionally*, demanding “autonomy” for the more “modern” *departamentos* in which they still ruled. The discourse revolving around such autonomy emerged as from 2000, but was much more vehemently staged after Evo Morales was chosen in 2005. It was seen, by traditional elites regrouping in the eastern departments of, first and foremost, *Santa Cruz* and *Beni*, as a way to find legitimacy for their representation of the “region”, and thus combat their political opponent: the government of Evo Morales and all it represents.

The key building block of the traditional subjectivity of the traditional Bolivian elite is *señorialismo* (Zavaleta Mercado 1986). It is the conviction of being *señor* (e.g. being white, bureaucrat, landlord, learned and cultured), in an overwhelmingly *Indian* world, which, even in the twentieth century, still “should” in the end be subordinate, and display paternal following and respect. But this status had eroded in the previous years, and had, as a matter of fact, already become “politically incorrect” since the 1950s. As subjectivity, however, it had survived. The main discourse the tacit *señorial* elite constructed as from 2000, then, was *autonomy*. Autonomy by no means is a new banner in Bolivia: it was and is the motto of many mainly ethnic social movements in the country, and it was an important demand in the quest for ethnic and cultural “self-determination” and territory. In the course of time, the signification of “autonomy” has shifted. In the parlance of the old elite in its new regional guise, it today stands for the “modern Bolivia”, based on the sovereignty of the individual, on a neo-liberal economic model, and on a decentralized representative democracy. Ultimately, it stands for the policies prevailing in pre-2005 Bolivia.

Because the old order collapsed in the country’s administrative *core* (its state centre located in the *occidente* – the Andean region), now autonomy and independence *from* this centre, and the “unique-ness” of the *oriente*, have become crucial political signifiers (Laclau 2005), and a vehicle to preserve the bygone order at least in one’s “own region.” Since Bolivia as a whole obviously could not be “modern” (as the *oriente’s* elite would phrase it), at least some territories could. In the elite’s discourses, the so-called *Media Luna* was coined as the “modern Bolivia”, and was presented as opposed to the “archaic Bolivia.” This archaic Bolivia is portrayed as an

obsolete indigenous utopia; it is branded as obsessed by the nationalization of natural resources (and hence against the alleged contemporary common sense of foreign investment bringing employment and development), and as a dictatorship of indigenous communalism (whereas the “civilized world” has by now agreed on the superiority of individual freedom). In brief, autonomy-*cum*-modernity was now one of the vehicles of the old elites’ resistance against Evo Morales’ project.

It was one of the discursive tropes in its strategy to sabotage the debate about and the approval of a new constitution for Bolivia. This new constitution was one of Morales’ electoral promises, and a societal demand since the ousting of president Goni in 2003. It was realized through the election of an *Asamblea Constituyente* in early 2006, but obstructed by the opposition factions since its installation. The new constitution was eventually approved by the *Constituyente*, but the process is contested and fiercely objected by the *Media Luna*.⁶ It explicitly acknowledges *indigenous* full citizenship, e.g. the entitlement of indigeneity *combined* with the “canonical” equality *vis-à-vis* the law. Additionally, this new constitution launches a new political institutionality, in which the state is conceived of as the delegated entity of a *pluri*-nation. Combined with other clauses and sections concerning state prerogatives and declarations against the commercialisation of basic needs resources, the new constitution embodies the core stumbling block for the former elite. Their strategy entails pushing the autonomy-idea to its limits. Their scenario includes the possibility of a model in which several “states inside the state” exist, amputating the national government of its capacity to govern the national territory. This would enable them to preserve the nuts and bolts of their political power: the *doxa*-like “natural” inferiority of the indigenous and the *collas*, who in their view were *meant* to be peasants.⁷

⁶ At the time of writing this text, an agreement had been reached in parliament on a final draft version, and a referendum on this version was held on January 25, 2009. 61% of the Bolivian population supported the new text.

⁷ In Bolivian lowlands, “indigenous” (*indígenas*) is the term used today to designate the ancestral inhabitants of this territory (for instance the peoples like the *Guaranies*, *Guarayos*, *Chiquitanos*, *Moxeños*, and many others). “Peasant” (*campesino* or *colonizador*) is the term used for the Andean indigenous people that colonized new lands since 1952. Finally, *Colla* is the term used to refer to the Andean immigrants, highlighting their ethnic identity, irrespective of whether they live in urban or rural settings. We use the same terminology whenever we speak about the lowland discourses.

But after Morales' second electoral victory at the occasion of the August 2008 referendum, including an increase of his support in *Media Luna* territory, part of the local elite was left perplexed and desperate; their "inborn" subjectivity as *señorial* elite was evidently collapsing. Taking into account different political actors' subjectivity is, we believe, central to analyse their will to power, their political project, their strategies and possible alliances. Subjectivity is the manner a political actor places him/herself in the world, how he or she sees it and see themselves in it, and who they imagine to be their allies and opponents. In the case of Bolivia, this elite subjectivity was traditionally built upon an image of a "racial pyramid." The elite's privileges were not only perceived as the fruits of astuteness or hard work, but as the logical order of things – in racial terms. Political contestations were accepted as unavoidable, but they were not supposed to undermine the underlying rule: that the racial stratification was a given.

When such preconditions begin to wear away, the very subjective "groundwork" for one's political defence of interest falls to pieces. And perplexity and panic is the product when the underlying image of "a world that used to be mine" crumbles. The familiar world that used to be manageable and coherent, in so far as there was a shared framework even with the political adversary, has withered. Subjectivities come into being in configurations in which even adversaries are assumed to share specific cultural features and specific images about society's make up. When the foundations of that structure disintegrate, subjectivities providing for the initial self-confidence about the "us" and the values "making it worthwhile to fight for", fade. A loss of orientation about the right and the wrong, and about the means justifying the end, may occur. The world begins to feel beyond one's control, unknown, and the reaction often oscillates between paralysis and violence. In a way, even such violence might be considered a form of paralysis: it consists of ad-hoc eruptions of brutality, without any preset course of action underlying it, precisely because the sense-providing framework of one's place-in-the-world has been lost.

As the given of *señoralismo* was shattered, an enormous anxiety in the former master's psyche emerged: he is convinced that "the Indian" he has dominated wants revenge, wants to be the master. This idea that the main motive is that "the servant envies the master", and wants to be master, is part of the master's political calculation: he expects the other to act as he himself would have acted in such circumstances, and remains captured in a worldview constituted by "servants and masters." According to this

worldview, the master's own codes are mirrored: if the master feels entitled to use arms, violence, and even murder to defend his position in the world, he assumes that the rebelling servant will be ready to do the same. When the *pongo*,⁸ the indigenous, the *colla* immigrant no longer obeys his master, this produces confusion and indignation. When, however, the *colla* additionally does not behave the way the master assumes he would behave whenever he challenges his position and apparently aims for “masterhood”, then perplexity and anxiety crop up. Not only the former hierarchy, but the very underlying assumption of hierarchy and dominance as the only thinkable societal arrangement, collapses. Perplexity, at the same time, incites to search for new certainties. In the case of the *señorial* elite, this certainty tends to construe its foundation and justification in the possession of *land*. Land, especially among the most frightened and radicalised factions of the old elite, became a symbolic stronghold to their old position, as modernity and autonomy proved insufficient to keep the new order out. Land became the last bastion. Land symbolizes their impact on status at the national level; it stands – albeit more symbolically than in actual fact – for the traditional relation with the indigenous, the political *control* of people. The land becomes the justification for even hate towards this person who, categorically, remains the *other*. This categorically “other” is perceived as threatening the land, the last bulwark of the old image of one's identity – and therefore ignites revulsion. The opponent destroyed almost everything that in earlier days seemed to hold the world together, including the “natural order” of domination, and eventually also emasculating the defensive strategy of highlighting modernity and autonomy. The *land* remained as the final buffer against the world's meltdown and therefore worthwhile defending as if the “attacker” was subhuman. The scenario came true on September 11, 2008, during a shooting in the Department of Pando in the north of Bolivia. A massacre by the “thugs” of the old elite left 18 people dead. It came on top of earlier actions such as demolishing the offices of state institutions, making threat calls and battering indigenous pedestrians in the eastern cities, thus impeding *colla*-looking persons

⁸⁾ A *pongo* is the indigenous servant. He/she lives on the landlord's property, and works for him without receiving salary. This term was used in the Andean region before the National Revolution of 1952. In Eastern Bolivia, the term used is “*empatronado*” which literally means belonging to the landlord.

to cross the main square or pass through the centre of cities like Santa Cruz, Sucre, Cobija, Tarija or Trinidad.

Anti-Elites as New Elites

Of Evo Morales it is told that, when he first entered the presidential palace, he was scared by the guards in front of and inside the palace (Sivak 2008: 18). He is also known for giving official speeches in blue jeans and short sleeved and, more generally, for dodging the suit-and-tie uniform (Blasco Igual *et al.* 2007). “If what he represents is opposition to 600 years of exploitation, why should he wear a suit and tie?” asked Eduardo Gamarra, Bolivia expert at Florida International University.⁹ It typifies his background and long term “biotope”, and makes him a prototypical headman of a non-elite turned elite. And it produces a quandary for the new political leaders: their image of a fairer Bolivian society includes a more horizontal, less top-down polity. But to be able to bring this ideal nearer, they had to turn into leaders, into vanguard, into protagonists struggling to get their supporter’s backing, into elites. They need to convince as leaders, to be able to combat traditional (authoritarian) leadership. This presumes a subjectivity which comes close to a contradiction in terms. Remarkably, they do this fairly well: they easily convince overwhelming majorities of Bolivians of the validity of their proposals and of their performance – except that their ability to realize and pull through the things is easier for their constituencies to appreciate, than is their assurance that they will not become “haughty” or conceited. The insistence on *rejecting* being elites, and remain deferential and “obedient”, and to hold high the banner of humble-but-proud indigeneity, however results in some paradoxes – especially in their relations with sectors supporting the government but with some “elitist” features. These sectors are well worthwhile analysing; they embody the process of a swop-over of societal formations. Probably there are three such sectors supporting Evo Morales, each with their own background, symbolism and tailoring. And each of them wresting out a new subjectivity in a world they fought for to create – but have never known or lived before.

First, there are the intellectual and bohemian *blanco-mestizos*. They are the leftist journalists and columnists in the newspapers, the progressive

⁹ Quoted from an article by Marcela Sanchez in *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2006.

university professors, the NGO staff, the professionals in arts, education, and the like. They often have a disdain for upper class ostentation and middle class “keeping up appearances.” Next there are the “wealthy Indians”, most often Aymara and Quechua, who have migrated to the cities and done well. Most of them work in trade and in smuggling. They like to display their wealth during festivities such as *Gran Poder*.¹⁰ Finally, there are the leaders of social movements and intellectuals of indigenous origin. They were “upgraded” to elite since Evo Morales’ victory. Today, they are in ministries, in parliament, in think tanks and policy-preparing committees, or continue to run their organizations. They often loathe displays of power reminiscent of the previous powers-that-be.¹¹ All three apply specific emblems to distinguish themselves. And all three have their own, somewhat ambiguous relation to the new administration and to the old politico-economic elites they either half-heartedly relate to, or deeply loath.

The intellectual and bohemian *blanco-mestizos* are the ones most familiar with a privileged position. Although they are not really wealthy, they grew up in a society marked by a strong social hierarchy, to a great deal ethnically organized. They are the ones that, for generations, had access to higher education, in a country in which illiteracy rates, until very recently, were the highest in the continent, reaching levels of 20% of illiterates and 37% of functional illiterates.¹² They were also the ones that had grown up in families in which the *empleada* (maiden and nanny) never failed. Their resistance against injustice in the country, conservatism and narrow-mindedness, and racism, distinguished them from the *blanco-mestizo* majorities, but they were still marked by their socialization, their access to resources and their cosmopolitanism – which separated them from the subaltern majorities they sympathised with. They would probably boast about their close ties with indigenous fellow-citizens and treat them well, but they would – with the exception of some indigenist intellectuals – be more

¹⁰ *Gran Poder* is a yearly grand indigenous festival in La Paz. Thousands of exuberantly dressed dancers take the main streets of the capital, celebrating Jesus Christ’s power, in a unique blend of folkloristic and religious inspirations.

¹¹ Some criticize the fact that too many *blanco-mestizos* are in Morales’ government, thus reproducing colonial patterns and toning down the political changes.

¹² Since the 1990s, a major improvement occurred thanks to substantial investments (partly provided by foreign donors) and a national educational reform.

interested in modern arts museums, in the latest Western music, literature and fashions, in information technology and in travelling than in indigenous worldviews or traditions. They would have the ambivalent position of many “decent” Latin American middle classes: being proud of the indigenous colourfulness of their country and the tourism it attracts, but feeling reluctant to be identified with the “underdeveloped” world contradicting their hope to be identified as members of the Western cultural universe. In this sense, they might share an (albeit differently perceived) preference for the “modern” with the landholding elites of the *Media Luna*. In a country dominated by Spanish-spoken and-written official and public discourse, a country with a Western style political structure, a country in which traditionally all the better jobs were in practice inaccessible for citizens with an indigenous background, they were – and are – elite, whether they liked it or not. They were the white-collar workers hiring the indigenous, they were the teachers educating the indigenous, they were the voices making a plea for a better deal for the indigenous, and they were the travel agencies bringing the tourists to the archaeological sites and the “authentic” indigenous communities. Their “distinction” has been related to their upbringing, their eloquence, their informal but western dress, and their always-present ethnic identity – an identity-distinction that everybody in Bolivia, in all circumstances, is always aware of, and is impossible to untie through a mere societal make-up.

The taken-for-grantedness of this all changed with Morales’ presidency. This group sympathises with Morales’ political stand. They voted for him. They identify with the leftist ideological position present in Morales’ campaign and policies. But they are *not* indigenous, and feel uneasy about the ethnic card continuously played out by the new administration. They are concerned about what exactly a “decolonising” education system would entail for them, and they are reluctant about learning an indigenous language – as proposed in the education bill waiting for approval in parliament. They cannot imagine a “communitarian democracy.” The confidence about the whole series of tacitly accepted accesses and entitlements they have always felt because of their societal position, today is withering. It is an elite, which might be politically close to Morales, especially in his anti-authoritarian qualities and in terms of their disgust for their more narrow-minded peer’s discrimination, but there is some vacillation about their place in the ethnically circumscribed universe Morales sometimes

presents. They differ from Morales' popular supporters in that they appreciate his ideology, anti-elitism and his rescue of democracy as a trustable system – but they vacillate when it comes to the “indigenous” Bolivia.

The situation is different for the better off urban indigenous. As far as “ethnic prestige” is concerned, they have won an important battle. No longer are they the slighted group of “rich but improper”; today they are the “rich and acknowledged.” At the same time, they may have something to loose. They accumulated their wealth in the “niches” of the hitherto politico-economic system; a system unwilling and unable to make everybody abide the law, go by the rules and pay his taxes. It was the system which privileged the cunning, which was lubricated by bribes and corruption, and celebrated immunity. One of the elements of Morales' programme is to undo these “breaks” for the better-off – mainly the traditional elites, but also the powerful indigenous traders hiding in informality or exploiting the deficient customs and labour controls. Tighter controls to reduce smuggling, to protect the local industry and the workers, and tax levying, to increase state income and reduce unequal access to opportunities, would definitely harm these groups of affluent Aymara and Quechuas.

The ethnic composition of La Paz requires full attention. In the city, clear-cut racial distinctions do not work. Historically, many indigenous “became” *mestizo*, thanks to dressing Western, speaking Spanish and becoming construction worker or *artesano* instead of working in agriculture. Returning to their communities, however, they would be “Indian” again. Thus, in specific interactions and settings, identities might shift continuously. At the same time, until recently, being an “Indian” in La Paz would bring about discrimination and disparagement. This made the “play” with one's identity an ongoing one and a strategic endeavour. Most likely, over half of the city of La Paz is, and has always been, of “more-than-half” indigenous origin. What has changed is their position in the city. The process dates from long before the election of the first indigenous president. It is part of the indigenous emancipation and increase in self-esteem that marked the continent as a whole. According to most observers in recent years there has been a reverse in the decline in wearing the traditional female indigenous attire, the *pollera* (multiple long skirts), the hair worn in a double tail, and the bowler hat. The city of La Paz now is, at least partially, not only diffidently, but brashly indigenous. The pioneers of this dynamic were the inhabitants of the historically indigenous districts of the

city, the somewhat higher-up, habitually poorer districts of La Paz. The “landless”, urban indigenous dedicating themselves to being traders and market sellers have prospered thanks to the lax control of international commerce and the informalisation of the economy since the mid 1980s. An important vehicle for the advance of many of these people, who often came from the countryside in the 1960s and 1970, were the *fraternidades*, religious groupings, regional organizations, dancing ensembles and bonding associations all-in-one. Often having somewhat strained relations with the official Catholic Church and with the local parish priests, these fraternities became protagonists in the yearly dance-procession in La Paz: the *Fiesta del Gran Poder* (Guss 2006). At the same time, they frequently counted in their midst some very wealthy members. Being unable and reluctant to enter the *blanco-mestizo* business circles and neighbourhoods, they would exult their prosperity in and through the increasingly massive, flamboyant and unabashed parade of *Gran Poder*. As the prominence of *Gran Poder* increased, so increased the prestige obtained by participating in it, co-financing it, and demonstrating, through the purchase and use of immensely costly costumes, one’s riches and one’s success. “For them [the indigenous inhabitants] the dance would be a vehicle through which the city would be remapped, erasing old boundaries and with them the stigmas that had been long associated with native cultures. Through the ostentatious display of their new economic power the dancers would inevitably receive the respect and acceptance that had always eluded them. Or at least that was the hope, as using dance to negotiate new social realities can be fraught with ambiguity and conflict [...], these dances reflect the contradiction and tragedy of “group[s] poised in the space between two cultures” (Salomon 1981:164) – neither rural nor urban, traditional nor modern, Indian nor *mestizo*” (Guss 2006: 318; Albó and Barrios 1993). This elite is ethnically close to Morales, but politically, the differences in interests might be considerable. Additionally, their wish to “show off” at the parades and in the *fraternidades* sits uneasy with the political and economic levelling-out tendency of Morales’ administration. Their political stand has hitherto remained undefined, but their “demonstration effect” as examples of a different type of indigenous (instead of *blanco-mestizo*) elitism is hard to overestimate.

And finally, there are the stern, ideologically motivated supporters, the ones politically dyed in the wool. Many of them were leaders of the

multifarious social movements that, with their incessant protests, brought down previous presidents and brought Morales his presidency. They are both *mestizo* and indigenous, although a majority might be indigenous. Most of their elite-emblems are *anti*-emblems. They often reject protocol, and pomp and circumstance. They will not have any of the grandeur of government formalities, and in many cases even have an ambivalent relationship with the current government *because* it is government. They prefer “movements” to “institutions”, and “struggle” over “governance” (although this *is* a group that in the end does have confidence in the formation of a “de-colonized” state) and take pride in their “decent poverty”, their indigeneity and colloquial vocabulary and codes. An anecdote told by Assies and Salman (2005: 293) on indigenous leader Felipe Quispe might illustrate the point: “In September 2002, threatening roadblocks, he (Felipe Quispe, ts/xs) cited the (at the time, ts/xs) incoming government to a dialogue in the hardly accessible community of Amaguaya “where there is no water or electricity” in order to make them “descend from their palaces and know reality on the ground.” He invited the president and his ministers to share in a *fricasé de vicuña*¹³ to which they finally acceded. With his peculiar sense of humour Quispe commented that the presidential delegation left the place with a diarrhoea (personal communication, 7 October 2002).”

Others however have entered government circles. They are in ministries, in parliament, in the constitutional assembly installed by the current administration, in strategic state institutions and in committees established by the executive to study future policies or recommend on existing ones. They of course share, to a certain degree, in the booty that comes with such positions. But they are very much aware of the vigilance of their “bases” (Crabtree 2005: 96), and in general keep a low profile in terms of demonstrating the fruits of their elevation. The insignias of their new elite status are and remain first and foremost the political ones: their ability to mobilize, to spur a crowd, to be eloquent and to phrase the demands of their people in a convincing way. In the second place, however, their ability to “come close” to the central power-holders, and to get things done for their supporters, has expanded. But this is no visible elite-badge they are carrying around; their status depends on something, which, in the end, only exists if articulated among their followers. Their elite status is a virtual one:

¹³) *Fricasé* is a traditional Bolivian plate, a spicy meat stew. The *vicuña* is a camelid, related to but much smaller than the lama or alpaca.

it is not recognized by the traditional elites, not expressed in luxury or more “elevated” lifestyles. From their supporters’ point of view, it is acknowledged in terms of “political progress” and not as a recognition of any superior position. They themselves will often emphasise their humble background and their intransience as “ordinary people”, not too good for the most ominous circumstances to unite with their bases. An element possibly contributing to this configuration is that, traditionally, in indigenous communities including urban indigenous communities, leadership positions rotate. Therefore, it is not possible for leadership to be detached from “ordinary” life. A person’s prestige in the community depends on how he or she has performed as an authority during a term in office. Moreover, regular assembly-like meetings often take place and these are characterized by massive communal participation. The mode of decision-making is frequently deliberative, lengthy and consensus seeking, rather than limited to pre-empted vote-legitimising statements. Instead of recurring to a personal sovereign status as “representative”, authorities consider themselves “delegates” in constant need to *relate* and to reconfirm their position and legitimacy (Rivera 1990; Delgadillo Terceros 2004: 107–109). “There is a strong sense of accountability among community leaders towards their grass-roots” (Crabtree 2005: 96). Additionally, they highly value (and practice as much as is possible) the ritual dimension of such leadership: they perform rituals when they enter the governmental palace for the first time, they take advice from *yatiris*¹⁴ reading coca leaves and performing libation acts, and they bring a handful of soil from their communities to join it, thus expressing the re-unification of the shattered indigenous peoples of Bolivia.

This, then, is an elite not complying with many of the attributes usually connected to elite positions. Their position they owe solely to the political conjuncture. Most likely, they would vehemently reject being elite at all.

The shared element between these sectors of “hesitant new elites” supporting the new administration is apparently their close link to this administration – largely *produced* by this administration in its effort to consult and deliberate over its plans with the Bolivian society. They are no longer voters and/or lobby’s; they are continuously being urged to voice their opinion and/or are, especially in the case of the latter group, being consulted by

¹⁴) *Yatiris* are medical practitioners and community healers among the Aymara of Bolivia, Chile and Peru.

the government to participate in decision-making, for instance through CONALCAM (the *Coordinador Nacional para el Cambio*) in which the social movements supporting Morales convene. The democracy in which the new elites participate, is one in which their view is repeatedly *asked for*. This incites them to go to their supporters, and deliberate. The idea is expressed in the popular saying *Evo somos todos* (“we are all Evo”). The whole idea is of course not without problems, exclusions and setbacks, and might in the end turn out untenable or promoting favouritism and nepotism, since the “job-reward” for party militants is deeply engraved in Bolivian politics. Nevertheless, it is an interesting experiment, challenging elites to perform as elites by undoing elitism.

By way of Conclusion

We looked at a country in which unstable elites are searching for their stature. Some can no longer be the elite they had always been. Others cannot yet identify with a new elite status they consider reluctantly but did declare that they would use their privileged position to invalidate privileges altogether. The quandary both groups are in is of course a consequence of the spectacular political developments the country has witnessed. The “new elites” have drastically disrupted a societal hierarchy that had constituted the very basis of Bolivian identities, subjectivities and habituses for decades, if not centuries. This involves a political, an economic, and an ethnic dimensions. In all three respects, specific codes of conduct, attires, emblems and self-perceptions were shattered, to such a degree that the whole idea of an acknowledged, consolidated or even discernable elite in Bolivian society was corroded. The old elites, at least segments among them, responded to the loss of both their position and the societal imagery of hierarchy it was connected to, with despair, panic and heartless violence. On their side, the new elites are reluctant or hesitant about how to comply with their new positions. They are partially supported by populations whose own history prevents the population to fully identify with any claim for status, opulence and even authority. New elites in Bolivia today are a bit confused and their recognition by society is hesitant, fragmented, and even denied.

The question of Bolivia’s elite is a conundrum: it is made up of a mixture of political elites preaching broad societal deliberation and participative democracy in a permanent way, and in that sense it is anti-elitist. It also

includes a new government-supporting elite which is fragmented, a bit lost and to some extent reluctant to perform as an elite. Third, we find the old elite, still strong economically speaking, but politically in shambles – shambles out of which some of them assembled a sinister atrocity of egoistic, land-based self-sufficient subjectivity bringing ruthless bloodshed to the country. Neither of these groups has any precise idea about how to behave. As for the landowning cynics, they are not even sure about the very humanity of the “populace out there.”

Bolivia is in a transition process, which shook up all available schemes and traditional marks of social distinction. At the same time, a new type of political leadership seems to be emerging. Although still fragmented or sometimes partial, among new elite segments and among large sections of the population, a sense of a new political style and code (based on delegation, participation and deliberation – instead of on “handing over” authority) is rising. To understand the performance of the newly emerging “distinctive” groups, possibly new thinking is needed. Such new thinking would have to combine a focus on both the traditionally highlighted material and the cultural-symbolic features of distinction, keeping in mind their political dimensions. The latter dimensions might, in some instances, alter or even largely disqualify the material or more symbolic signs of distinction.

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